

## Chapter 88: The Nature of Absolution

Rufus was at the Geller Estate, discussing property development for the Geller family/Remore Academy joint training facility. In a conference room, he sat across a table from three members of the Geller family, while he was alone.

“There is plenty of unclaimed, undeveloped territory adjacent to the Geller Estate,” Rufus said. “Just give us a location that works best for the changes you want to incorporate, and we can go from there.”

“I know you have a good relationship with Danielle,” the man across the table said. “That doesn’t mean we’ll just acquiesce to your every need.”

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“What exactly is it you think I want you to acquiesce to?” Rufus asked. “This joint venture has already been agreed to, and as for the details. I literally just said that we will adapt to your needs.”

Rufus got to his feet, placed both hands on the table and leaned toward the man on the opposite side.

“Clearly you are part of whatever internal faction within the Geller family that was against this agreement from the outset, and you ended up negotiating the details as part of whatever deal got your faction to accept the proposal at all. I don’t care about that; I have no interest in playing these games and I’m not going to be a pawn in your family’s internal politics.”

Rufus stood up straight and adjusted his light jacket.

“I know you want to drag this on as long as possible, so let me be explicit. When I come here tomorrow, I want to talk to someone who will actually work on this project instead of stalling it out. If that doesn't happen, then the Remore Academy will undertake the venture without Geller family involvement.”

The man in the middle of the Geller family representatives gave Rufus a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Are you sure you have the authority to make that decision, Young Master Remore?”

“I’m not an aristocrat,” Rufus said, “so that’s Mr Remore, to you. If you think I have anything less than full authority over this undertaking, then keep pushing and see what happens.”

Rufus took his unopened document satchel from the table and headed for the door.

“Mr Remore...”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say when you have something worth listening to,” Rufus said without turning around and walked out the door.

Rufus was unhappy as he left the building but calmed down walking through the Geller Estate. The fresh air and smell of verdant plant life improved his mood with every breath. He stopped short as something strange appeared in the air in front of him.

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➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

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“What?”

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The whole way back through the delta, Clive had been pulling items from his inventory to look at them through Jason’s interface ability. After he almost crashed the airboat into the side of an embankment road, Jason kicked him from the party so he would concentrate on driving.

“Can I see that new ability of yours?” Jason asked Humphrey. They had learned that they could give party members permission to see each other’s abilities, which had Clive setting up plans to use Jason as a cataloguing tool.

“Sure,” Humphrey said.

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#### Ability: [Hero’s Drive]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Human Ambition].
- Essence abilities advance at an accelerated rate.
- Enemies to not gain additional resistance and damage reduction against your abilities for being higher rank.
- When fighting higher-ranked enemies or when significantly outnumbered by enemies of the same rank or higher, time before abilities can be used again is reduced.
- Gain [Mana] and [Stamina] over time while this ability is active.
- When this ability is triggered, gain an immediate burst of stamina and mana. This can exceed normal mana and stamina limits so long as the ability remains active.

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“That’s not bad,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t start running around looking for bronze-rank monsters to fight, though.”

“No fear on that front,” Humphrey said.

“You say that,” Jason said, “but I can’t help but think you’ll go diving in every time someone needs help.”

“That does seem like exactly what you’d do,” Clive agreed.

“There is one more thing I’d like to try out,” Jason said. He opened up his new contacts list. Most of the names were listed as out of area, his eyes lingering on the names of his family.

“Very out of area,” he muttered to himself.

Moving through the delta on an airboat, they weren’t too far from the Geller family estate. That placed several names on the list within range, including Rick, Phoebe and Danielle Geller. Rufus was also in range, which meant he was probably at the Geller Estate himself. Jason tapped on his name.

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- You have sent a voice chat request to [Rufus Remore].
  - Voice chat with [Rufus Remore] has been initiated.
  - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has joined voice chat.
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“Jason?”

Rufus’ voice had a slight distortion, like he was using a low-quality microphone.

“G’day, Rufus. Not sure if you can hear me over the sound of the airboat.”

“I can’t hear any airboat. What is this?”

“I had a racial gift evolution,” Jason said. “Humphrey too.”

“Uh, hello,” Humphrey said.

“What happened?” Rufus asked.

“We fought a bronze rank monster,” Jason said. “Well, I say we, but Clive and I mostly watched Humphrey do it.”

“That’s not the case at all,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t suppose you’re in the market for a funky bronze-rank whip?” Jason asked.

“We looted it from the monster and decided to sell it and split the proceeds.”

“What were you thinking, taking on a bronze-rank monster?” Rufus scolded. “Tell me everything.”

“You’re breaking up, Rufus,” Jason said. “Looks like we’re about to go out of range.”

“What does breaking up mean?” Rufus asked.

“What’s that Rufus?” Jason asked. “Ksht ksht ksht.”

Jason closed the connection.

“So,” he said, turning to Humphrey. “What do you think you’ll get from your awakening stone?”

“Should you have cut off your power like that?”

“It was bad reception,” Jason said.

“I’m not sure what that is,” Humphrey said, “other than an obvious lie.”

“I can do the ritual of awakening for those stones you got,” Clive said, “although maybe you should do it, Jason. You could probably use the practise.”

“Works for me,” Jason said.

“Do I get a say in this?” Humphrey asked.

“A ritual of awakening is basic stuff,” Clive said. “It’ll probably be fine.”

“What do you mean, probably?” Humphrey asked.

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Clive’s study at the Magic Society campus was like an old second-hand book store combined with an antique shop, neither of which had been organised very well. Stacks of papers were stopped from falling off chairs by stacks of books piled on them; strange curios were placed absently on shelves, stands or inside glass cabinets.

“Is this safe?” Humphrey asked, looking around. His eyes could see the invisible magic Jason couldn’t.

“There’s a system,” Clive said unconvincingly as he shuffled through papers. “You know, Jason, the Magic Society would definitely pay you to use your ability for the cataloguing of items and abilities.”

“How much?” Jason asked

“Not adventurer money,” Clive said. “Decent, though.”

“I’d rather fight monsters than bureaucrats,” Humphrey said.

“I think I might be with you, there,” Jason said.

“The Magic Society does important work,” Clive said, still searching through the room for something. “You both have monster record tablets, don’t you? What about the essence list tablet? You think they just happen? People work hard to provide the information you rely on to stay alive, but adventurers just dismiss them as dull functionaries.”

Jason and Humphrey looked at each other and shrugged.

“That’s a fair cop,” Jason said.

“I never thought about that,” Humphrey.

“No one ever does,” Clive said unhappily. “Ah, I knew it was around here, somewhere.”

He dug out a magic wand from what looked to be a basket of sticks and led them to a door. Beyond was a room as sparse as the one outside was overstuffed. The only thing in it was a plain metal table in the middle.

“Close the door behind you, please,” Clive said.

From his storage space, he took out the two boxes they had retrieved from the underground complex, placing them on the table. Using the wand he had dug out from his study, he began moving it over the first box. Untold years worth of muck started rising off of it, right down to the oldest filth that had ingrained itself into the metal. The muck drifted through the air to the side of the room, collecting into unpleasant spheres. Leaving the spheres floating in the air, Clive carefully opened the box. Inside, the contents had been kept intact by the box's remnant magic. Clive took out three identical skill books and sat them the table.

“The condition is good,” Clive said, opening the cover of each to look at the title inside.

“The Way of the Reaper,” he read. “Form one, Way of the Hierophant. A martial art skill book?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “My martial art. Part of it, anyway. There are five forms in total.”

“There were five boxes,” Humphrey said.

“Just this one is the size of a normal skill book,” Clive said. “No wonder they split them up. A collected work would be huge.”

“No kidding,” Jason said.

The second case had another three books, this time the third form of Jason's martial art.

“You said you don't know where your martial art comes from, right?” Clive asked Jason.

“That's right,” Jason said. “My friends know, but they're keeping it secret for now. Something to do with a contract they took before I met them.”

“I'll do some digging, see what I can find,” Clive said. “In the meantime, how about we get an awakening ritual going?”

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Inside one of the Magic Society's dedicated ritual rooms, Humphrey was standing in the middle of a magic circle, holding an awakening stone in his hands.

“Good,” Clive said approvingly. “You did well, Jason.”

The awakening stone disappeared into Humphrey's hand. His eyes glowed with swirling blue and gold light as the magic settled into him, then dimmed.

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- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened the dragon essence ability [Spartoi]. [Humphrey Geller] has awakened 5 of 5 dragon essence abilities.
  - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened all dragon essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dragon essence ability.
  - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has completed essences.

Ability: [Spartoi] (Dragon)

- Ritual (summon)
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Summons three dragon-tooth warriors.

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“Finally,” Humphrey said.

“Finally?” Clive asked.

“My storage space power. It equips anything I summon with iron-rank magic equipment, but I didn’t have a summoning ability. My mother kept telling me it would come, but it’s a relief it finally has.”

“Spartoi,” Jason said. “That’s unexpected.”

“You’ve heard of them?” Humphrey asked.

“They’re part of a myth from my world,” Jason said. “Oddly enough, about a guy named Jason. He was on a quest, and to complete it he needed to pass these trials set by a king. One of the trials was to sow dragon’s teeth, and a bunch of soldiers sprung up. He threw a rock at one of them and they got confused and killed one another.”

“Was he the person you were named after?”

“No,” Jason darkly. “I was named after a footy player.”

“I guess you just hope no one throws a rock at them,” Clive said. “Want to try summoning them now?”

“I’ll wait until we’re outdoors,” Humphrey said. “I want to see what Jason gets.”

“Yes,” Clive said, turning enthusiastically to Jason. “The no-ritual awakening. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“It’s really not that exciting,” Jason said. “Let me clean this up, first.” Jason took a cleaning cloth and some alchemical solution from the ritual room’s supply cabinet and wiped the residue of the magical circle off the smoothly-polished, stone floor.

“Now,” Clive said eagerly, as Jason put the cleaning supplies away.

Jason shook his head, taking out the awakening stone. It glowed with a white-gold light, like a holy object.

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Item: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (unranked, epic)

*An awakening stone containing the power of redemption (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
  
- You have 5 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Absolution]. Absorb Y/N?

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The stone vanished into Jason’s hand and his eyes started shining with golden light, which darkened until they were black orbs before returning to normal.

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- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Blade of Doom]. You have awakened 3 of 5 doom essence abilities.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
  
- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.

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The others were in Jason’s party and could see his ability description. They were all quiet for a moment as they looked at it.

“Uh... Jason?” Humphrey asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“That was an awakening stone of absolution,” Humphrey said.

“Yes it was,” Jason said.

“Didn’t it say something about containing the power of redemption?”

“I think it did, yes,” Jason said.

“And it gave you the power to conjure a cursed weapon,” Humphrey said.

“Strictly speaking,” Clive said, “it’s unholy, not cursed.”

“My mistake,” Humphrey said. “You used the power of redemption to create an unholy weapon.”

“It, uh, it does look like that, yeah,” Jason said.

“How did you manage that, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to go accusing anyone of being evil,” Humphrey said.

“Very fair,” Jason said.

“I feel compelled to ask, though,” Humphrey said. “Jason, are you evil?”

“I think everyone has dark urges,” Jason said defensively.

“Yes, but not everyone has the blade of doom,” Humphrey said.

“I only had unawakened ability slots from the dark and doom essences,” Jason said.

“It would be a bit odd if I could conjure the wand of sunshine and rainbows.”

He held out his hand and an elaborate dagger appeared in it, made of black obsidian and blood-red crystal. The blade was jagged, slightly curved, and the single most sinister object Jason had ever seen.

“How did you get that?” Humphrey asked. “The awakening stone was absolution.”

“Well,” Jason said, turning the knife over in his hand. “I’m absolutely going to mess up some monsters with it.”